

“Come and See”

Rev. Alex Creager – 10/24/2021

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

My first job ever in ministry was leading youth mission trips in the small town of Booneville, Arkansas. There were four of us college students – Melissa, Jake, Amy, and myself. Every week we welcomed youth from all over the country to come and serve in this small town of 400 people in the beautiful Ozark mountains. The youth came from everywhere – Texas, Minnesota, Illinois, Tennessee, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska. Every week about 70 youth from the across the country would come. But we also had some local youth who wanted to tag along with everything we did. They were in middle school, and seeing these high schoolers from all over the country come to their small town, they wanted to hang out with them and spend time with them. So they joined us as we painted and repaired homes, led a daily kids club, hiked in the mountains, cooked hot dogs and tacos, prayed, worshipped, sang songs, and talked about our faith.

On a hot sunny day, that July, one of the middle schoolers, Tyler, came up to me, as I was just planning to go out to work site from the church we were all staying in. Tyler had followed along with us all summer long. He painted homes. He played with kids. He joined us for worship. And he found in it a great love, and now he wanted to know more about God and what it meant to follow Christ.

Wanting to take a step of faith, Tyler asked me if I could say a believer’s prayer with him. Now I was born, raised, baptized, and confirmed Presbyterian. I had never heard of a believer’s prayer was or what I was supposed to say in it. But I didn’t want to let this moment pass. I knew this was a holy moment. I knew something was happening in Tyler’s life, that God was starting something special.

So we went outside, knelt down on the sidewalk, and prayed together in front of the church. Tyler gave me a bug hug after it and seemed very thankful.

But I was worried. I didn't know the believer's prayer. What if I didn't say the correct words, didn't get the prayer formula exactly right? Would this prayer and this sacred moment with this youth still count?

So I went up to my co-worker Jake right after this. I was shaking and jittery, and I asked Jake, "What are the words for the believer's prayer? I didn't know what they were and I think I may have really messed up the prayer with Tyler."

In response, Jake, so calm and collected, said, "Alex. I'm Catholic. I have no idea what the words are for the believer's prayer. But that's okay. Because for us faith isn't one moment or one prayer. It's not saying the perfect words and being done with it. Faith is a journey. It's a journey of following Christ. We are constantly discovering and growing in Christ."

Jake was right, of course. As he was about many things that summer. My prayer with Tyler, that moment wasn't an end point. It was a beginning, it was start. It was the start to a journey, a journey in which God was going to keep appearing and calling and teaching and showing new things to Tyler. While I was so worried about having everything right, Jake simply took joy in the fact that a journey of faith had begun.

Nobody starts out with the perfect words, perfect prayer, or perfect understanding of Christ and his way. Even Jesus' first disciples, who saw him face to face, didn't fully grasp who he was at first.

In our reading for today, one of them, Nathanael, even dismisses Jesus right away. He couldn't believe the Messiah would be from Nazareth. He hears Nazareth and immediately think of Jesus, and probably imagine some shining city on a hill. But that's not what Nazareth was. In Jesus' day, Nazareth was a backwoods town up north nobody ever wanted to visit. Reza Aslan, in his book *Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* describes Jesus' hometown this way:

"Ancient Nazareth rests on the jagged brow of a windy hilltop in lower Galilee. No more than a hundred Jewish families live in this tiny village. There are no roads, no public buildings. There is no synagogue...It is a village of mostly illiterate peasants, farmers, and day laborers: a place that does not exist on any map."

It's no wonder that Nathanael's first reaction to hearing about "Jesus of Nazareth" is to say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This doesn't sound to him like the coming Messiah, the one who will rule the nations, the one whom the prophets spoke about with power and might. This sounds to him like a country bumpkin, a nobody from nowhere. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, the friend to the outcast and sick, this did not at all fit his expectations of the coming king. And if was all based on his expectations, his understanding, his words in that moment, then Nathaniel would have missed so much. Like us, Nathaniel needed time, needed learning. He needed a journey of faith.

Still today, our own assumptions, expectations, and thoughts that we know it all can actually be barriers to following Christ. When we think we have it all together, that we know it all, that there's nothing left to learn or grow in, that's when we actually become further away from Jesus. When we claim to know Jesus perfectly, that is when we are most dangerous, most hurtful, that is when we make Jesus into our own idol.

We make him into the god of the righteous and powerful and forget that he is truly the God of the sinners and down-trodden. We make Jesus into a god that is on our side, who supports only our causes, who dislikes the same people we dislike, whose plans match up with what best suits our wishes. We forget that Jesus came to flip the world upside down, including our own lives. There always exists a temptation to make Jesus into a little god that fits into our preconceptions. There is always the temptation to believe our starting point is the end point. But when we do that, we miss the real Jesus.

Luckily, Jesus keeps inviting us back. He invites us with the same invitation he offered to his first disciples. It is the same invitation that Philip offers to Nathanael. "Come and see." Don't stay where you are. Don't cling to your own expectations and assumptions. Don't think that faith is one single point in time. It is a journey and you are invited. Come and spend time with Jesus. Come and see things that will change the way you see the world. Come and see the hope of all people. Come and see this Messiah who touches the sick and eats with sinners. Come and see the one who transforms our hearts and changes our lives. Come and see the Lord whose love knows no bounds.

Once Nathanael meets Jesus, he shouts out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel!" But even with this faith, Jesus does not congratulate him. He doesn't say, "Well done. There's nothing more for you to learn and see. Your journey is finished." No. He challenges him. He tells him to continue following and journeying and growing. "You will see greater things than these...Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." As great as Nathanael's first response to meeting Jesus is, there is still so much more he has to see and know and do.

One of my favorite movies, which my family still watches every Christmas is the Muppets' Christmas Carol. There's a scene in it when the Ghost of Christmas Present first appears. He's a huge guy who takes up the entire room. You can't even see him in one camera frame. And he is in a room full of a gigantic feast – delicious breads, fresh vegetables, baskets of fruits and nuts. He is standing over Ebenezer Scrooge. And as Scrooge looks up, he is constantly saying the same phrase while holding his arms out wide, "Come in and know me better man." I love that scene, because it is so welcoming so inviting, so full of possibility. There is a joyous feast that he wants to share. "Come in and know me better man."

I think that's what Jesus is saying every time he says, "Follow me." Every time one of us hears a calling upon our lives, I think that invitation is there as well. "Come in and know me better." Jesus wants to share his life, his joyful feast, with us. It's an invitation

into a whole new way of being in Christ. That is what Nathanael is being invited into here. "You will see greater things than these."

When we follow Jesus, when we don't stop with our own preconceived notions and pride, when we take the step of journeying with Christ in humility, and community, and love, then our eyes are opened to see so much more of who Christ is. We see a savior who sits with outcasts. We find a friend who offers us strength in our times of greatest weakness. We hear a God who cries with us at the loss of a family member. We see one who empties himself, washing his own disciples' feet. We meet a love unmatched, a love that goes to Calvary to die and rise again from the tomb. When we follow Jesus, we meet the good shepherd, the true vine, the light of the world, the way, the truth, the resurrection, and the life. We meet a God who calls us beloved and children, and who bridges heaven and earth to welcome us with loving arms.

Friends, this is what we are all here today for. Not to have the perfect words. Not to say, we have it all right. Not to stop with the past or even the present. But to instead hear Jesus' ongoing invitation, "Come and see." And to know that together, as a community of faith, as a church body, Jesus is going to do something special here, Jesus is going to love and change lives and grow and push us and help us see gifts in ourselves and our neighbors. Jesus is going to challenge the ways we see the world. Jesus is going to challenge the ways we see ourselves. Jesus is going to challenge the ways we see God and draw closer to the One who made heaven and earth.

We only have glimpsed and begun to know Christ. There is so much more he has to show us. The journey is not over. Christ is still calling. "Follow me, for you will see far greater things than these." Amen.